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ABSTRACT

Although stress related to work has received increased attention in recent years, the role of personality characteristics in mediating job stress has not been systematically investigated. Nonetheless, the perception of work stress and the significance of various sources of support may vary considerably based on individual characteristics. Questionnaires were administered to 71 bank tellers in an investigation of need for social approval (NSA), leader support, group cohesiveness, and job autonomy as mediators of perceived stress. The data indicated that NSA was positively correlated with perceived stress and that cohesiveness lowered stress for high NSA persons while autonomy lowered stress for low NSA persons. Leader support reduced perceived stress for low but not for high NSA tellers. Interactions among variables in predicting satisfaction and performance showed that only group cohesiveness interacted with NSA and perceived stress in determining job satisfaction. The results suggest that individual differences variables such as NSA are important in understanding vulnerability to perceptions of stress on the job, and that personality characteristics are useful in assessing the effectiveness of certain mediators of stress. (NRB)

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APPROVAL MOTIVATION, GROUP COHESIVENESS, AND LEADERSHIP AS MEDIATORS OF PERCEIVED STRESS

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APPROVAL MOTIVATION, GROUP COHESIVENESS, AND LEADERSHIP AS MEDIATORS OF PERCEIVED STRESS

Abstract

Individual differences in need for social approval (NSA), leader support, group cohesiveness, and job autonomy were investigated as mediators of perceived stress in a banking organization. Data from 71 tellers supported the propositions that NSA is positively correlated with perceived stress and that cohesiveness lowers stress for high NSA persons and autonomy lowers stress for low NSA persons. Contrary to expectations, leader support reduced perceived stress for low but not high NSA tellers. Interactions among variables in predicting satisfaction and performance showed that only group cohesiveness interacted with NSA and perceived stress in determining job satisfaction.

APPROVAL MOTIVATION, GROUP COHESIVENESS, AND LEADERSHIP AS MEDIATORS OF PERCEIVED STRESS

Stress related to work has received increased attention in recent years. There exists, however, great diversity in definitions of stress, disagreement as to whether stress is an outcome or intervening variable, and questions regarding the impact of group, situational, and leadership variables on stress. This study was designed to investigate (a) the relationship between selected subordinate, group, task, and leadership variables and perceived job stress and (b) the impact of these variables and stress on subordinate satisfaction and performance.

Work stress has been shown to have significant negative effects on both employee health and psychology (e.g., Brief & Aldag, 1976; Kasl, 1978). This association of stress with negative worker outcomes has lead to numerous research studies designed to ameliorate the effects of job stress. Variables such as social support (e.g., Cobb, 1976; Sears, McGee, Serey, & Graen, 1983), work group cohesiveness (e.g., LaRocco, House, & French, 1980), leader support (e.g., House & Wells, 1978), and job autonomy (e.g., Beehr, 1976) have been found to mediate the relationship between stress and employee satisfaction and health.

While previous research (a) offers a method of defining work stress, (b) suggests certain moderators, and (c) has considered

various work outcomes, it has not systematically investigated the role of personality characteristics in mediating job stress. It has been argued that the impact of stress is best understood by considering both environmental stressors and characteristics of the individual. This approach has been referred to as person-environment fit (French, 1974; Van Harrison, 1978). In brief, it states that when an individual's motives to attain desired outcomes via work are not met or when the demands of work are beyond the capabilities of the person, then the fit is poor.

The perception of work stress and the significance of various sources of support may vary considerably based on individual characteristics. Lazarus (1971) suggested that a person's appraisal of a situation helps to define what is stressful. Individual differences in need for clarity (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1974), need for independence and achievement (Johnson & Stinson, 1975), and Type-A Behavior Pattern (Ivancevich, Matteson, & Preston, 1982) have also been found to moderate the relationship between stress and work outcomes. Thus, it appears that individual differences should be incorporated into investigations of work stress to more completely understand the processes involved in promoting person-environment fit.

Of particular interest is the personality characteristic of <u>need for social approval</u> (NSA). Research (e.g., Homans, 1974) and systematic analysis of interpersonal interaction (e.g.,

Goffman, 1967) indicates that a large proportion of human behavior is directed toward obtaining approval from and avoiding the disapproval of others in social settings. Martin and Greenstein (1983) found that approval motivated individuals are more dependent on others in task situations than low NSA persons. This suggests that high NSA persons may perceive greater stress on the job. If approval motivated persons are more vulnerable to stress and seek the acceptance of others, then it follows that they should be more responsive to the mediating effects of support and cohesiveness than low NSA persons. In addition, when stress is high and support from peers or superiors is not forthcoming, this should have an especially negative effect on the satisfaction and performance of high NSA persons. In contrast, if low NSA persons are more self-confident and self-assurred, they should respond more to the mediating effects of autonomy in reducing stress as compared to social support. The performance and satisfaction of low approval persons should also be lower under conditions of high stress and low autonomy.

Proposition 1: Need for social approval is expected to be positively correlated with perceived work stress.

Proposition 2: Need for social approval is expected to interact with leader support and group cohesiveness in reducing the perceived stress of high but not low NSA individuals.

Proposition 3: Need for social approval is expected to interact with autonomy in reducing the perceived stress of low but not high NSA persons.

Proposition 4: Need for social approval, perceived stress, and support (leader support and group cohesiveness) are expected to interact in predicting job satisfaction and performance. Specifically, outcomes will be lower for high NSA persons in high preceived stress environments where support is low.

Proposition 5: Need for social approval, perceived stress, and job autonomy are expected to interact in predicting job satisfaction and performance. Here, outcomes are predicted to be lower for low NSA persons in high perceived stress environments where autonomy is low.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of bank tellers in 11 branch offices of a large midwestern bank. A self-report questionnaire was distributed to 85 tellers and usable responses were received from 71 individuals (83% response rate). The sample consisted almost entirely of women (99%) with an average age of 36.7 years. Performance ratings were obtained for each teller from the branch assistant manager and paired with survey data using a specially prepared coding system.

Instruments

Perceived stress was measured using a composite score of four items. The items assessed job stress, role tension, frustration with the organization, and strain associated with the organization's policies and practices. Need for social approval was measured using the Martin-Larsen Approval Motivation (MLAM) Scale (Larsen, Martin, Ettinger, & Nelson, 1976; Martin, in press). The scale contains 20 items designed to assess the individual's desire to seek approval from and avoid the disapproval of others in social settings. Leader support was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (Jermier & Berkes, 1979). Group cohesiveness was assessed using a 9-item semantic differential scale designed to measure group atmosphere (Scott & Rowland, 1970). Job autonomy contained four items concerning the degree to which employees have control over tasks, setting work quotas, establishing procedures, and handling exceptions (Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980). Job satisfaction was measured using a single item where respondents evaluated their degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their current job assignment (Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980). Performance was assessed using supervisory ratings on five scales: dependability, planning, know-how, coordination with other employees, and overall performance. These ratings were combined to form a single index.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 contains means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency reliability values for the variables considered in this study. All multi-item measures had acceptable internal consistency reliability.

Table 1 also indicates support for Proposition 1 with a significant positive correlation between NSA and perceived stress. The other propositions were evaluated using moderated regression analysis.

Proposition 2 was partially supported by a significant interaction between NSA and cohesiveness (F (1, 67) = 4.66; p < .017) with stress lowest for high NSA persons in more cohesive work groups (see Figure 1). Leader support interacted with NSA to predict stress (F (1, 66) = 2.94; p < .045); however, the form of the interaction was not as expected. Here, leader support reduced stress for low rather than high NSA tellers (see Figure 2).

Proposition 3 was supported by a significant interaction between NSA and autonomy (F (1, 67) = 5.39; p < .012) with autonomy reducing perceived stress for low but not high NSA persons (see Figure 3). Thus, results supported Proposition 3 and provided partial support for Propositon 2.

Partial support was obtained for Proposition 4 using job

satisfaction but no significant interactions were observed for performance. For satisfaction, a significant three-way interaction was observed between NSA, perceived stress, and cohesiveness (F (1, 62) = 5.73; p < .010) with high NSA persons reporting lower job satisfaction when stress was high and cohesiveness low. Stress did not lower the satisfaction of high NSA persons when cohesiveness was high. The job satisfaction of low NSA persons was not affected by either stress or cohesiveness. Proposition 5 was not supported for either satisfaction or performance.

These findings suggest that social support does interact with NSA to predict perceived stress. However, the source of support has important implications for stress reduction. As expected, high NSA persons respond to support from co-workers. Not only does this support reduce perceived stress, it also is related to reduced satisfaction when it is not forthcoming in high stress situations. On the other hand, leader support reduced perceived stress for low but not high NSA persons.

It appears that the nature of the relationship between the leader and subordinate is more important than first envisioned. Supportive leader behavior, per se, is not a source of stress reduction. While supportive leaders provide encouragement that may help subordinates cope with stressful situations, by virtue of their official role as controllers of organizational rewards

and punishments (e.g., enforcement of rules, performance appraisals, reprimands, etc.), they may simultaneously serve as a source of anxiety. The amount of leader activity and contact associated with increased leader support behavior may be viewed positively by low NSA persons given their greater self-confidence and self-reliance. In contrast, greater contact with the boss may increase the potential for disapproval in the eyes of high NSA tellers, counteracting any stress reducing effects arising from supportive comments.

Increased autonomy on the job allows employees greater opportunity to exercise their abilities and control their work situation. This leads to a reduction in perceived stress for low NSA persons. However, autonomy may present the high NSA person with an increased potential for confusion and failure. This is hypothesized as the reason autonomy reduced perceived stress for low but not high NSA tellers. However, increased autonomy did not lead to improved satisfaction or performance on the part of low NSA tellers. This may be attributed to the model not being complex enough to adequately represent all the important forces operating in the situation or the sample size not being large enough to provide the statistical power necessary to properly test the existing model.

The results support the notion that individual differences variables such as need for social approval are important in

understanding vulnerability to perceptions of stress on the job. Personality characteristics are also useful in assessing the effectiveness of certain mediators of stress. This provides support for the person-environment fit approach to assessing stress at work. However, improved prediction of job satisfaction and performance in organizations such as the one studied requires models more complex than those investigated here. An intriguing finding of this research is that high approval persons look more to their peers for support while low NSA persons respond more to their supervisors. It appears that, in this organization, support from supervisors does not have the necessary reward value sought by high NSA persons and may even be perceived as threatening. Thus, they turn instead to equal status peers for support who are likely to be less threatening and more sympathetic to their situation.

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TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Internal Consistency Reliability Coefficients for Variables Measured

Measure	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Need for Social Approval:	53.6	7.93	(78)						
(2) Leader Support:	16.6	4.39	-14	(87)					
(3) Group Cohesiveness:	43.6	7.90	-07	02	(84)				
(4) Job Autonomy:	11.0	5.14	-19	21	-21	(83)			
(5) Perceived Stress:	14.0	3.37	30	-39	-24	-26	(76)		
(6) Job Satisfaction:	3.4	0.97	-25	32	19	29	-35	(NA)	
(7) Supervisory Ratings:	22.7	6.01	-16	17	-11	26	-12	22	(91)

Note: Decimal points omitted from all coefficients.

NA = Not Applicable.

Figures in parentheses are Cronbach's Alpha coefficients.

$r = .23$, $p < .05$; $r = .30$, $p < .01$.

$n = 71$.

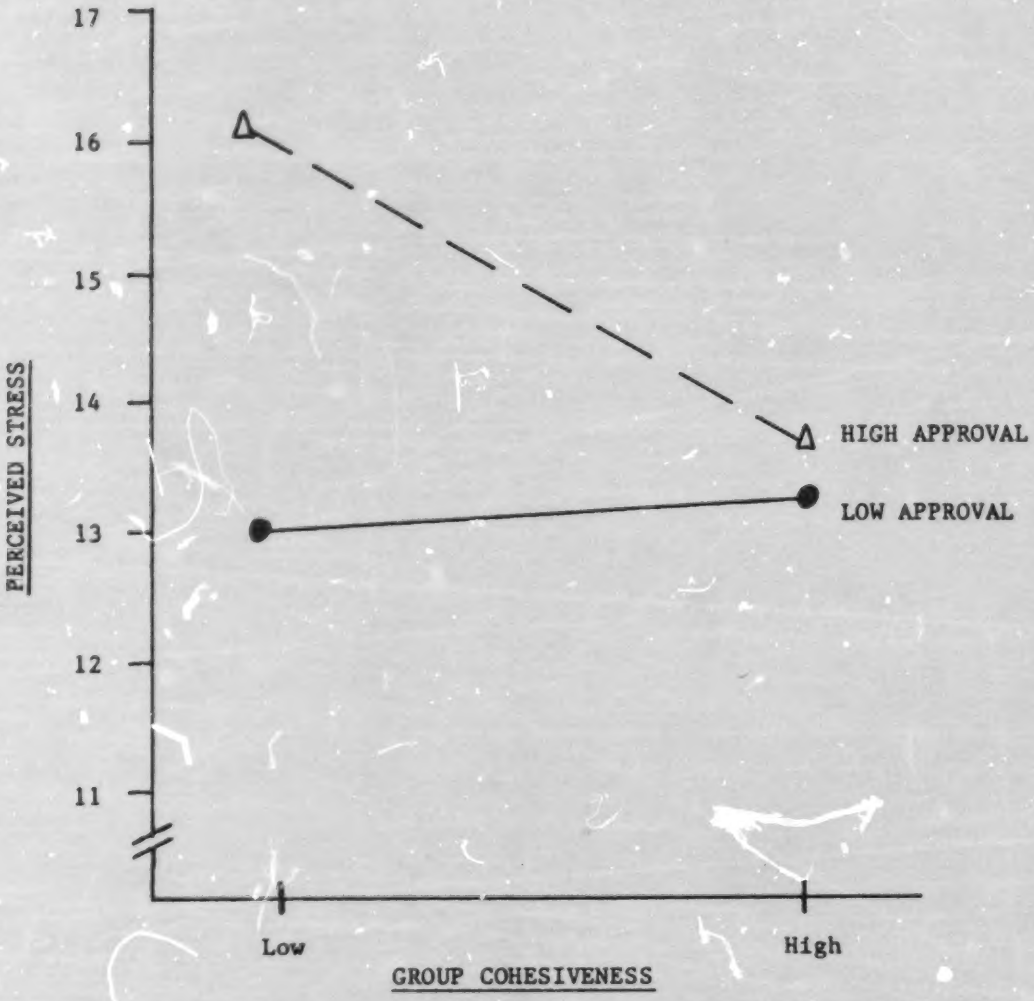

FIGURE 1: Interaction of Need for Social Approval and Group Cohesiveness on Perceived Stress

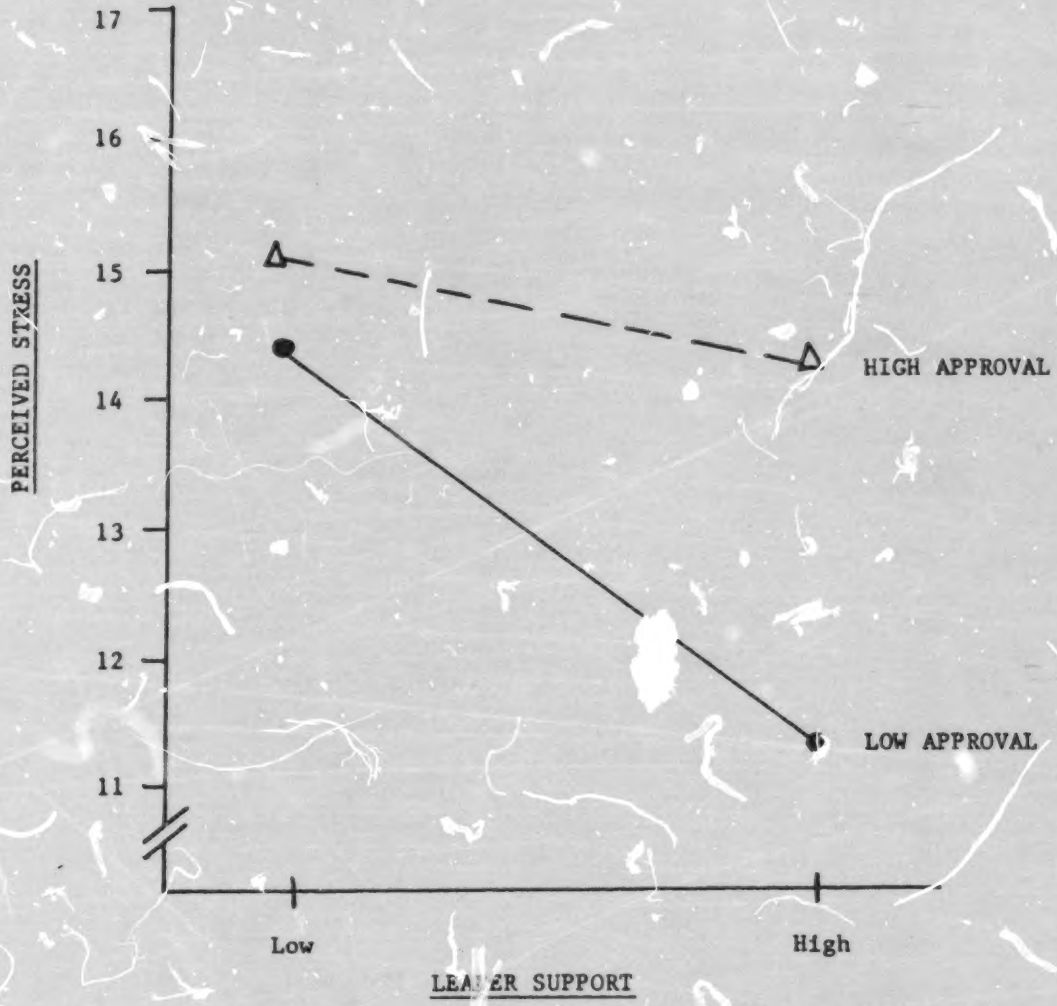

FIGURE 2: Interaction of Need for Social Approval and Leader Support on Perceived Stress

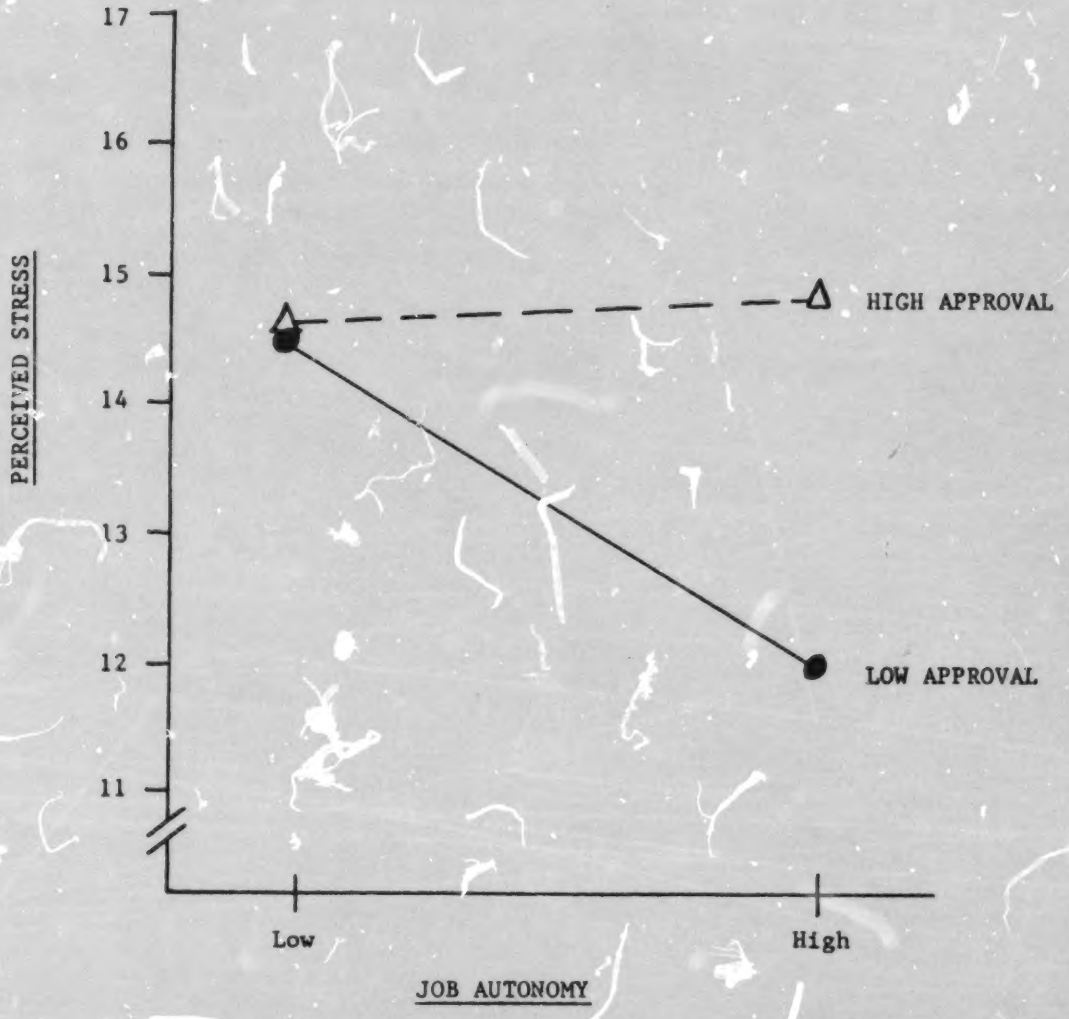

FIGURE 3: Interaction of Need for Social Approval and Job Autonomy on Perceived Stress